

October 24, 2010

Charlotte Congregational Church

Ephesians 2:14-22, Isaiah 32:16-20

"He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance."

"He created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody."

"The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of hostility."

"Christ came and preached peace."

It would be hard for the author of Ephesians to be any clearer. Jesus intends for us to live in peace. Jesus tore down the walls. He created a new vision for humanity and showed us the way to live. Most of all, he taught peace through the example of his life -- most clearly through his death and the cross that got us to embrace. The more I read the Gospels the more confirmed I am that Jesus intends us to live in peace which means that bringing peace to the world has to be the one of the most central tasks of Christians. The question is how? How can we bring peace to a world where the darker side of human beings leads so often to conflict and violence?

As many of you in this church know, I have spent the last nine years of my life trying to answer this question. My study of peace really began in earnest after the terrible events of 9/11. I have told this story many times but I think I will repeat it anyway. Sam and I were not together when we heard the news about the four planes. We were each at our separate workplaces. Later that day when we had a chance to talk, we discovered that we both had the same response. We had each thought, "we cannot respond to this with violence." We said this knowing that violence only begets more violence. Of course, that is exactly what happened with consequences we are still dealing with and which are not yet over. The consequences have been severe. It has been yet another lesson to teach us the futility of war.

I have often wondered what would have happened if our response had been different? What would have happened if we had taken hold of the many hands extended to us in friendship and support during the weeks and months that followed the tragedy? What if we had chosen a path of cooperation, love, and, yes, perhaps eventually even forgiveness. What if we had chosen a path toward peace, not war? Yet how could our response have been different? To tell you the truth I cannot envision a different

response because we haven't established the structures and infrastructures that will transform us from a culture of violence to a culture of peace.

What do I mean by a culture of peace? There are lots of ways to think about a peaceful world but, for me, all of them involve thinking differently about peace itself. A few years ago I heard a former Marine and U.N. Chief Weapons Inspector in Iraq speak at St. Michael's College. He had a lot to say about war but it was what he said about peace that struck me most profoundly. He said that as a Marine he was trained to kill. Put him in certain situations and he will fight to death --- either his death or the death of his enemy. He was prepared to die if his weapons didn't kill first. After all, that's what he had been trained to do. Yet it is the peacemakers he had met that he considers the brave ones. "I can't do what they do", he said humbly, "It takes too much courage". Perhaps that's our problem. We don't often acknowledge the fact that peacemaking takes courage. Looking danger in the eye without armament requires a lot of courage and a lot of faith. Ask Will about what he experienced when he went with Christian Peacemakers to the Holy Land a few years ago.

Yet that isn't the most helpful place to start when we begin to be serious about peace. That's because we don't have to go to dangerous places to be peacemakers. There are people who are called to do this work around the world and they are definitely needed. They are truly brave. But that doesn't let the rest of us off the hook because we stay home. Jesus calls us to make peace wherever we are and there are endless opportunities to bring about a culture of peace. In order to be a peacemaker we have to first develop the capacities within ourselves, the capacity to handle the difficult things in our own lives without our usual armaments. It does take courage to look honestly at ourselves. It requires a different kind of training than most of us have had in our lives.

The first thing we need to do is to rescue the word peace. It seems to me that our definition is too narrow and small. Peace is just a feeling and no wonder so many people consider peace impractical when our definition is so squishy and touchy feely. We need a definition that makes sense in every aspect of our lives. It needs to make sense both for times when we are upset about things personal and when planes fly into the towers. As the theologian Walter Brueggemann says, "Shalom is such an abstract word in our ears that we need to find ways to make it concrete." Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, comes from the root verb meaning to be complete, perfect and full. Can we ever have those qualities without peace?

So we are being called to this more expansive peace that is both personal and larger than personal. Not a negative peace that is anti-war, but a positive peace that moves us toward a new vision for the world. The negative peace comes from the deeply ingrained idea that human beings are naturally violent. Some say war is inevitable. We don't really have a choice because violence is what is deepest in our nature. Yet nothing we do as Christians makes any sense at all unless we believe that our deepest nature is the image of God.

Jeremy Rifkin's recent book, Empathic Civilization offers support for the view that humans are not naturally violent but are naturally empathic. This has radical implications for our view of the world. Rifkin writes that we are in a race for what he calls biosphere consciousness to transcend our sense of isolation, an isolation that results when we create divisions between each other. He reports that recent research has focused on the discovery of mirror neurons or empathy neurons suggesting that human beings have a deep capacity to empathize with each other. It is hard wired into our natures to be empathic. "Mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct simulation. By feeling, not thinking." This is from the research of Italian scientist, Rizzolatti, to help us to understand that the capacity for empathy is what may be deepest in our nature, not violence. It has been postulated that we have built in structures that assist us in understanding others. It may not be that human beings are essentially selfish, but are connected through empathy that compels us to resonate with others. We are in our deepest selves relational beings. It is through deep relationships that our lives take on meaning.

So if we are to find the peace Christ promises, we need to think differently about peace. We need a new definition. I think that definition of peace has already been written and can be found in the "Earth Charter". Those of you who have been in this church for awhile should be familiar with this document. If you are not, I invite you to check it out on the web. The Earth Charter is an absolutely fabulous document written as a new covenant for the world. In it, peace is defined as "the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part." This is our first clue to a practical peace that is found in relationship --- right relationships with ourselves, others, and creation.

The bottom-line is that we have to find a way a way to live in peace if we are to survive as people, much less as Christians. We have to find a way to be in relationship with all

life if the very Earth is to survive. The planet is in peril and we have to develop the capacity for peaceful responses to the many, many changes coming our way. If we want to continue living in the world, a world that will be much, much warmer with either too much water or not nearly enough water, we must develop new skills for living. As resources become scarcer and the number of climate refugees increases we will either develop the skill of cooperation or we will be defending our crops against the mass of displaced persons. We won't be able to escape this fact because we live in Charlotte or Shelburne, Vermont!

You notice that in all of this I haven't said that living in a culture of peace means that there won't be any conflict. Relationships have conflict. And it is a guarantee that there will be more potential for conflict as resources become scarcer and scarcer. We can take consolation that every great spiritual teacher had some conflict in their lives. In fact, no spiritual teacher who denies this is worth a grain of salt. We certainly know Jesus had conflict. It is how we respond to conflict that determines whether or not we live in a culture of peace or a culture of violence. Conflict does not have to lead to violence. To respond to it peacefully takes special skill --- a skill for which we, as Christians, should have a particular affinity but for which few of us have been trained.

So what is it that we do? Practically, I think what is really helpful is to look around to see if there are any models of peaceful cultures on this planet. Are there any cultures of peace? Are there any places where we can see peace in action? For me, a model does exist in the country of Costa Rica. Costa Rica is one of the places where a culture of peace is being embraced by an entire nation. I don't mean to imply that Costa Rica is better or that it is perfect. I've never even been to Costa Rica. Yet through my relationship with Rita Marie Johnson, I have been studying their efforts to establish the infrastructures that promote peace. They are taking some positive steps in the direction of a culture of peace so there is a lot we can learn from the Costa Ricans and even emulate, if we wish. For instance, we could establish a Ministry of Peace and Justice in our government, a person at the Cabinet level to advise our leadership at the highest levels on alternatives to violence. As is the case in Costa Rica, we could also be training our citizenry in the capacities needed for peace. We could have peace education in all of our schools to give our young people the tools, the capacities they need to be peacemakers. We could be training the next generation to be peacemakers. We could transform our military to become a vehicle for peace around the world. As they become exhausted and exasperated by war, even some of our Generals support this idea. Some

Generals in Afghanistan have asked soldiers to read "Three Cups of Tea". As Greg Mortenson writes --- the first cup is in welcome, the second is in friendship, the third is family. It takes courage to drink all three cups.

We don't even need to go as far as Costa Rica by abolishing our military. Costa Rica has not had an army since 1948. No, we don't have to go that far. We can just start by advocating that part of the military budget be allocated to teach our soldiers more of the skills needed for non-violent engagement. It would be a step in the direction of building capacity. There is a lot we could do as a civil society to promote peace and to begin the process of shifting from a culture of violence to a culture of peace. Not anti-war, but toward a living peace through relationship that will eventually make war obsolete.

This is all well and good but it is very secular, isn't it? Is this really the business of the church? What can churches do to promote peace? What can this Church do, for instance? We have struggled with this question and often set it aside. For instance, we have struggled with the idea of adopting a Just Peace resolution like that of the national and Vermont State UCC. I had once dreamed that our church would be the first UCC church in the State to pass a Just Peace resolution but there are other churches in the State that have now taken the step we could not. I would love to see all of the Vermont UCC churches approve a Just Peace Resolution because that would put us firmly within the culture of peace infrastructure. Of course, the resolution needs to be written in a positive way, not against anything, but for something. It has to be a living document --- as we work for and with the broader structures that will change our culture.

The Just Peace Resolution would be a place to start. We are a favored, powerful group of people who are privileged to live in this beautiful, prosperous place. To once again quote Brueggemann, "Shalom in a special way is the task and burden of the well-off and powerful. They are the one held accountable for shalom." Those words definitely gave me pause to consider what I am doing to bring shalom to the world.

Some of you may have read in the Shelburne News last week that I have started working with a new organization that I believe is helping to develop a culture of peace in this country. The National Peace Academy was created with the recognition that we are at a pivotal moment in the history of our planet. We are at a turning point in which human beings have the opportunity to shift from a worldview of separateness and fear to oneness and hope, from competitive dominance, win-lose violence to hope and

recognition of cooperative interdependence, a win-win peace. We have always been at this turning point but never with such urgency as now. We have an opportunity to both breakdown and breakthrough simultaneously. From the perspective of the earth it is something we must do.

“On the breakdown side, we are suffering devastating and costly wars abroad, incapacitating political wars at home, collapsing housing and financial markets, unprecedented global climate change, and, in the United States, a homicide rate ten times that of other leading industrial nations and a prison population that includes 1 in every 100 citizens. Clearly, what we are doing today is not working, and citizens recognize the urgent need for a serious rethink in the way this country operates, both domestically and internationally. On the breakthrough side, we see social infrastructures and institution and programs bursting on the scene in civil society, business, and government around the world.”

That’s a lot to swallow! If you want to experience hope that a positive peace is possible I invite you to read Blessed Unrest by Paul Hawkin. In this book Hawkin writes that there are millions of emerging organizations, grass root organizations similar to the National Peace Academy around the planet --- in every country, on every continent. Small and large, these organizations are bubbling beneath the surface. This is where we need to focus our attention and give our support. The work of these organizations isn’t something you will usually find covered by the main stream media for it is too vested in the powers that be. Sadly, you also are unlikely to find it in most of the churches. But I think this church could become one of those emerging organizations that are shifting us toward a culture of peace. I keep searching for and celebrating these hopeful flowerings such as the National Peace Academy because I truly believe we can become Christ’s beloved community and live in a culture of peace. I believe this is our work. No one else will do it for us and none can do it alone. As Hawkin says, what each of us needs to do is put our oars in the water and to start rowing!

This is a good time in our church to confront these issues. We are in a period of reflection and prayer as we move toward our church retreat. It as a kind of examination of conscience, a chance to reflect on who we are and what we want to be. We all know and celebrate what has been in this church. The question is what will this church be in the future? For instance, just after the church retreat a course will be held at the church sponsored by the National Peace Academy. Rita Marie Johnson, an American woman

who has been immersed in Costa Rica's culture of peace for the past two decades, will be teaching at our church. The four-day BePeace Course is a fabulous start to developing the capacity to feel, speak and teach peace. This is what is being taught in Costa Rica in schools and business. Sam and I will attend along with one other member of the congregation and Will. It is a good start for four of us to have this training but I would love to see a few others join us. This is your invitation to attend. To quote Rita Marie, "Before directing the lightning in the sky, we must first harness the storms in our own hearts."

I believe Jesus wants us to be in right relationship with ourselves, others, the Earth, God and to know the peace that is the result. He wants us to have this peace and stand in a place of peace together with all peoples and creatures of the earth. Is this "pie in the sky" thinking? I don't think so. I can't think so. I know it won't be easy but we have the help of Our Lord. We must remember Jesus' parting gift to Peter, "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." It is his gift to us as well. Amen.